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ABSTRACT

The school choice movement, the "Sheff v O'Neill" desegregation suit, Connecticut's integration and equal opportunity planning, and Jonathan Kozol's "Savage Inequalities" raise questions about the meaning of equality in the context of public education and its possible conflict with liberty and choice. The work analyzes participation in school governance in the city of New Haven and in three high-, middle-, and low-income suburbs to investigate typical high and low parent involvement. Citizen involvement need not always reinforce inequality, but existing local-control institutions structure participation to produce inequity, partly because standards of deference to expertise and school boards' desire to agree in public greatly constrain the governance role of ordinary citizens. Urban schools have become the alternative of last resort for people without options. This is a constraint on freedom and is one of the effects of a public education system of local control that forces a needless choice between democracy and equality. A centralization of resource allocation with decentralization of school governance will enhance both educational equity and citizen participation, and would balance democracy with equality. (Contains chapter notes and an 18-page bibliography.) (DFR)

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